Photo composite.

The RadAlt Is On!

By Ltjg. Scott Simpson

Spatial DISORIENTATION

Our detachment had been together for a short time, and we quickly were burning through the work-up cycle. Our OinC checked in just before week-one work-ups, and we worked hard to get through all of the wickets before deployment. Our detachment consisted of a new HAC, three H2Ps fresh out of the FRS, and the OinC, who was returning from his aviation-appreciation tour.

I just had passed my first fleet NATOPS check. The brief wasn't my finest hour, but, when I showed up for the flight, my game face was on. I had finished the flight with a surprising amount of praise from my instructor. This solid check flight gave me a mild confidence boost going into the final phase of work-ups and the deployment. I also had the detachment ops job as a 2P, so I was jumping through flaming hoops to figure out what I was doing.

My OinC and I were scheduled for a good-deal .50-cal shoot, and, being a gun lover, I couldn't have been happier. I would be in the right seat and get the majority of stick time. We also would get some AWs requaled. The OinC was a calm and educational HAC to fly with; the evening couldn't have been better.

After the brief, we launched at 1600, with five souls on board for the first half of the event. We had an hour and a half of daylight left. The helo flew nicely and behaved well; my confidence in the aircraft was high. It was a fun flight that boosted my piloting confidence level—sounds like a rookie waiting for a mistake.

Once we got on range and the first AW's quals nearly were complete, the gun jammed with a round in the chamber—no big deal. We called the squadron on the way back, and they had everything we needed ready for our return. The tower sent us to pad three to clear the jammed round, and, within 20 minutes, we were fixed and ready to go.

It now was dusk, and we needed to do the night portion of the shoot, so we relaunched on the second half of the bag. We arrived on the range and promptly put a smoke float in the water. Knowing we were short on time, I hurried to get on target so the AWs could open up on the evil smoke float. It now was dark with a broken cloud cover and a barely visible horizon.

Once the AW reported he was ready, the HAC told me to turn back in to the target. I knew where it was because we had plotted it on the multi-purpose display and had a fly-to-point on its location. We also had FLIR up so the HAC could guide me directly to the target. We were flying at 200-feet AGL when I started my turn.

Because I now was a "super pilot," I thought I could turn the helo around in near-total darkness without referencing my gauges. After all, the aircraft had flown like a champ all day. As I started my turn, the AWs focused on looking for the target, the HAC kept an eye out for the marker, and, just to make sure no one was watching the gauges, I figured I also would look outside. (After all, I am night VMC-qualified—barely—and we had a strong aircraft.)

About halfway through the turn, I decided to look at my gauges. About that time, the HAC heard his variable-altitude-warning-indicator tone and looked at his gauge.

As I focused on the gauges, I heard him yell, "Power!"

I realized our situation about the same time he did. I started to pull power on the collective an instant after his call. It seemed like an eternity to us. I had lost 120 feet of altitude in just a few seconds. I hadn't added any power during the turn, and I hadn't been hawking the radar altimeter (RadAlt) like I should have. As we passed through 90 feet on the way to 80 feet (which is where I started the recovery), the pucker factor in the front seats went through the roof. True to form and very calmly, he said to me, "Don't do that again."

After thinking it over, I suppose he figured it had scared me bad enough I would be extremely careful, so he let us finish the flight. On the return, we heard our HAC calmly discuss how close the five of us were to not going home.

In retrospect all of the things I did to make that evening extremely hazardous are crystal clear. Overconfidence in the aircraft and myself were big factors. I routinely had allowed myself to get so bogged down with deployment preps that I wasn't focused. When finally a good deal came along, I was too complacent and too relaxed.

Although we work, succeed, and fail as a crew, and we all played a role in this near catastrophe, it was my job as the pilot at the controls to make sure we were in a safe-flight envelope. I should have called for my copilot and aircrewman to keep one eye on their tasks and one eye as a backup. Because they were engaged in other assignments, no one was checking on me. It's a good idea to continuously remind ourselves that our copilots and aircrewman are essential to our survival.

Fortunately, the worst thing that came from this near-tragedy was the cost of some trust I had earned from my OinC over those previous weeks. In time, I managed to earn back his trust. But, as new aviators, the last thing we want, second only to planting a perfectly good aircraft in the water, is for our HACs and OinCs to lose confidence in us. I have learned never to rely only on systems like RadAlt and AFCS. There isn't, and never will be, a substitute for keeping a good, solid scan.

Ltjg. Simpson flies with HSL-46 Det 5.